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COMMENT

SOUTHERN SHRINES

EVERY traveler may be his own Columbus; for every journey is a voyage of discovery, leading, mayhap, to the promised land. The editor, setting out for a few talks about poetry in the warm and mellow South, discovered rich quarries in the blossoming landscape and ships of magic ready to set sail from the shores—all guarded by local loyalties jealously excited and aware.

In other words, she seemed to find a stirring of new beauty in the hearts of the people as well as in the spring-garlanded fields and hills; and an enthusiasm of preparation—a feeling of expectancy, as if efflorescence must be as simple and inevitable in art as in nature. Sow the seed, till the soil, and the harvest will surely follow—such would seem to be the faith of the new South, the South which loves its traditions but refuses to be enslaved by them, which is not satisfied to sit in colonial houses and contemplate its historic and romantic past.

To be sure, there are spinsters in Charleston and Savannah who still live on tea and toast in the midst of faded splendor rather than sell ancestral portraits by Sully and Romney, or even a single mahogany hautboy or old Lowestoft plate; *grandes dames* of the old régime who stay indoors rather than replace the carriage-and-pair with an automobile. And there are college professors to whom Sidney Lanier uttered the last audible word of poetry; who even, in extreme cases, re-

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sent the present neglect of Timrod. But the nephews and nieces and grandchildren of these ultra-loyalists are forming poetry and art societies and little-theatre enterprises, and inviting up-to-date people like Carl Sandburg and Daniel A. Reed to help give them a good start. And they are aiming at a frank expression of the locale in their exhibitions and poems and play-productions—a special stress which is much to be desired, because the beauty of that moss-hung landscape, and the dramatic contrasts of feeling in the spirit of the bi-racial people, are a sufficient basic motive for putting those south-eastern Atlantic states more adequately on the modern artistic map.

Columbia, South Carolina, was the first full-stop of the editor's pilgrimage. In its little Town Theatre, the adroit reformation of a quaint old house, Mr. Reed, trained in the Chicago Little Theatre and seconded by a group of enthusiasts, is offering a generous hospitality to all the arts. Plays, exhibitions, lectures, readings, musicals, all find audience-room here and a congenial atmosphere of challenging sympathy. Even the quiet old University of South Carolina, a few steps away up the hill, seems to welcome this modern interloper into the old state capital, and to co-operate in the stirring-up process which its presence implies. And it is not easy to be stirred up under the languid southern sun, in towns whose every old mossy brick and stone is sacred but whose occasional sky-scraper seems an anachronism.

Proud Charleston was the second stage—Charleston, as

indomitable as ever, as unchangeably a beautiful great lady of heroic spirit and aspect. What Charleston wills she does: not in the bravoura Chicago manner, by a bubbling-up of helter-skelter democratic forces; but by a haughty wave of her queenly hand, the grand gesture of the assured aristocrat who never dreams of denial. Today she wills the arts: she is restoring her old houses, summoning her painters to local exhibitions, and creating the Poetry Society of South Carolina, with its two hundred members professional and amateur, and its critical committees to pass on poems and award numerous prizes. Du Bose Heyward, Beatrice Ravenel and others are leaders in this effort to turn the local ambition toward the arts; also one or two painters who recognize the pictorial charm of the colonial houses with their grilled gateways, and of the moss-draped, semi-tropical landscape.

The wealth of historic tradition and association in Charleston may well be a hope and an agony in the heart of any poet who loves her, for no art has yet expressed it adequately. The old houses bring something of it home to us—houses spaciouly planned for patriarchal slave-holding families, stately enough for eighteenth-century banquets, and of an elegance befitting the crinoline of Victorian emotions; houses therefore inconsiderate of modern needs, imprisoning many a pathetic comedy of servantless impecuniosity, and perhaps now and then a tragedy of some free spirit beating its wings against ancient barriers. One wonders at neither excess of loyalty, so beautiful is the curve of old mansions along the Battery against the wide blue water of the harbor,

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so full of charm are the fading memories, the lavender-scented relics, of more leisurely, better-mannered days.

If Charleston is a great lady, Savannah is a fine one. Charleston commands, and Savannah persuades. She is tempted to sit dreaming over her past, to linger in the two old moss-hung graveyards whose mournful beauty is a wonder-story all over the world. Children were romping in the Colonial Cemetery while I scanned its eloquent monuments, but they avoided the most eloquent of all—that bitter memorial of a suicide, with four coiled serpents carved in the four-square stone, under the inverted marble urn, as the only record of a nameless agonist. But Savannah does not forget that she is one of the great ports of the world, with all Spanish America to the south of her; and now and then she salutes the future with a sky-scraper. Or even with a poetry society—a little one, The Prosodists she calls it, to show that its five members are students of technique.

Jacksonville is frankly modern, with more sky-scrapers than colonial houses. And the cause of modern poetry, of modern art, is eagerly sponsored by the Round Table Club, whose membership is both professional and amateur. Marx G. Sabel, whose second POETRY group will appear in June, is one of its officers.

From young Jacksonville it is only an hour or two by motor to old St. Augustine. But even in St. Augustine the invading tourist demands a compromise between old and new; and gets a swept and garnished, guide-regulated museum-fort, a quaint little gate-guarded ancient street for his

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modern trinket-shops, and numerous ultra-modern hotels disguised in pseudo-Spanish architecture. St. Augustine is on the high-road; in full-season it seems less atmospheric than San Antonio, and far less intact than drowsy old Santa Fe, still lisping Spanish to her aboriginal pueblos. But it has corners to which one may retire with the past—a little old graveyard, an ancient church or two, certain mossy walls. And perhaps the most wonderful corner of all is that barrel-vaulted guardroom of the old fort whose damp masonry is fringed to the top with delicate maidenhair.

A contrasting episode though ultra-modern seemed blessed with timelessness, like all other simple and elemental experiences. This was a flight in a passenger aeroplane over the white sands and blue water of Atlantic Beach. The sensation?—oh, merely a feeling of being joyously at ease, like a bird, as we sailed slowly through the warm, blue sky, and looked down at the fishes in the rippling sea and the automobiles crawling over the long white strip of sand, and at the cottage roofs and the stretch of marsh with its ribbon-twist of river. It seemed strange that men had waited these thousands of years to do a thing so natural, so inevitable.

From Jacksonville I followed the northward trail of the blossoming spring, stopping at Atlanta's suburb, Decatur, for a day in the Agnes Scott College, which has a course in modern poetry; and at Bowling Green, Kentucky, where new oil-wells are piercing the century-old farms, and new ideas the patriarchal before-the-war traditions; and finally at Louisville, where Cale Young Rice, Hortense Flexner

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King and others keep the muse's fires alight, and where Otto A. Rothert, convinced that Madison Cawein was one of the immortals, is devoting years to the preparation of a monumental *Life and Letters* complete enough to satisfy the demands of the poet's vociferous future fame.

The journey was another reminder of the variety and potential richness of culture, of imaginative and spiritual life, in these far-flung United States. The problem is, of course, to make the local loyalties generously productive and creative instead of narrowly exclusive and prejudicial, to sweep away hindrances between the imaginative energy of elect souls and the adequate expression of that energy in the arts and in life. The energy is there—of that I was once more convinced during this southern journey; but against its vital force rise always the dead walls of conservative repression.

The people, there as elsewhere, must learn that beauty is created from within—it cannot be inherited from the past or imported from over-seas, or manufactured for passive minds by theatrical and movie syndicates and subserviently popular writers and artists. It is an achievement of the individual soul; and if the individual soul fails to achieve it, to create its own beauty in some one of the innumerable art-impulses or spiritual impulses of life, something within that soul turns to dust and ashes. And what is true of the individual is true of the group: hand-me-down art and literature, hand-me-down ethics, morals, politics—the ready-made everywhere, the self-created crowded out, speeded away—this is the dusty-ashen threat against our modern civilization.

H. M.